



Not So Smart

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For weeks I have been drowning in a sea of talk about smart politics and smart politicians, and so have you. Let's make an end of it. Most of the political smartness I have witnessed has usually outsmarted itself in the end. In the governing and self governing of men, smartness is a terribly transitory thing. It is wisdom that counts.

Take the episode of the Intelligence Mission between the Administration and the new candidates, which turned into a contest of smartness on both sides. After the Johnson nomination Kennedy was so anxious to appease the liberals that he couldn't wait for the Eisenhower offer to be made formally. Jumping the gun, he picked Stevenson and Bowles as his liaison with the CIA briefers. Hagerty (with Nixon doubtless behind him) was also terribly smart, seeing no reason why Eisenhower should help Kennedy in the hotbox his convention smartness had created, and turned his face stonily against any liaison men. Outcome: no hits, no runs, no assists.

But Kennedy's problem is still there: what to do about the millions of Democrats and Independents for whom Stevenson was a symbol and Kennedy is not. The politicians who had written Stevenson off beforehand (including Stevenson himself) were not so terribly smart after all. My experience is that the political pros are the last men in the world to know what the seething, if silent, forces are in a convention, just as they are the last to know what are the fears and tumults in the human heart. Like all journeyman technicians, they only know how to count, weigh, and balance, but they are dumb about intangibles. There isn't one of them to whom I would tip my hat when it comes to intangibles, yet it is always on intangibles that elections—like battles and wars—are won and lost.

All this is by way of introduction to the assembling of Republican clans at Chicago.

Nixon has for years been hailed as the kleagle of the clan of smart politicians, long before Kennedy came to join him in that role. When Nelson Rockefeller made a bid for recognition as a Republican candidate, in his swing across the continent, Nixon and Leonard Hall had him smothered in a blanket of hostility in every state in which he turned up.

The Democrats had a host of Presidential candidates, even if only one was dominant. The Nixon forces didn't dare let Rockefeller's campaign even reach the convention floor, with some equal chance to make a fight of it. From Nixon's standpoint this made sense. From the standpoint of the Republican Party and its political fortunes it may prove disastrous.

The Democrats have left themselves wide open and vulnerable to the right kind of Republican attack. But it should be clear to any detached observer that Nixon, with all his political smartness, will be the wrong man to exploit these weaknesses.

The nomination of Kennedy and the acceptance of the most liberal platform the Democrats have ever framed sets the problem for the Republicans: how can they get a candidate and platform which can meet this challenge and make inroads into the labor, liberal, and Negro voting groups which are normally Democratic? The Democratic choice of Johnson for second place, and the disgruntlement of the Stevenson wing of the party, give the Republicans an opening to exploit. Kennedy's youth gives them another opening.

I wonder whether the Republican strategy group, made up of their smartest politicians, knows these rather obvious facts. Do they know that Rockefeller, in his persistent and continuous advocacy of a fighting liberal platform, is the only Republican who could nullify the impact of the Democratic platform?

Do they know that those who consider Kennedy too young would scarcely be set afire by Nixon on this score, but would feel confidence in Rockefeller's maturity? Do they know finally that the current Castro crisis, involving our relations with the whole of Latin America, deeply involves Nixon in the Administration's failures, but that Rockefeller's wide and deep knowledge of Latin America would win him support?

I suppose it is foolish and futile even to ask these questions. The answer to all of them is that whether the Republican strategists know these facts or not, their minds are made up and will not change. Long ago they decided that Nixon was their man—that he is a smart politician, that he knows how to handle himself in the clinches that they can count on his policies and decisions. Rockefeller? They regard him as an outsider who is trying to upset their decisions by appealing to the people, many of whom are Democrats anyway. As if that were not exactly the point of Rockefeller's strength.

After 20 years in the wilderness, from 1932 to 1952, the Republicans had eight years of power with a war hero. It looks now as if they were determined to go back to the wilderness. Which is where political smartness often ends up.